

id: 197535
date: 2009-03-18 14:38:00
refid: 09TASHKENT323
origin: Embassy Tashkent
classification: SECRET
destination:
07TASHKENT2026
09STATE24316
09TASHKENT281

header:
O R 181438Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0623
INFO NSC WASHINGTON DC
CDR USTRANSCOM SCOTT AFB IL
HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
AMEMBASSY KABUL
AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
AMEMBASSY BISHKEK
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY BAKU
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
USMISSION USNATO
AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
AMEMBASSY RIGA
AMEMBASSY ASTANA
SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

----- header ends -----

S E C R E T TASHKENT 000323

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2034-03-18
TAGS: PREL, MARR, PGOV, PHUM, PINR, UZ
SUBJECT: At Times Angry Karimov Says Afghan Transit Can Continue,
Seeks "Cooperative Approach" with U.S. on Democratization

REF: TASHKENT 281
STATE 24316
07 TASHKENT 2026 (NOTAL)

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard B. Norland, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

1. (S) Summary. President Karimov told the Ambassador

March 18 that his earlier understanding with General Petraeus regarding commercial transit of non-lethal cargo through Uzbekistan to Afghanistan remains in place, despite Karimov's evident embarrassment at the public recognition accorded human rights activist Mutabar Tadjibaeva during the March 11 "women of courage" event in Washington, which he believes had a political agenda aimed at him. He expressed a desire to work with the U.S. on democratization and human rights in Uzbekistan but asked that we adopt an approach that avoids public "pressure," which he termed counter-productive. He warned that Russia is trying to make itself the sole gatekeeper on Afghanistan, and urged us to acknowledge the key role that Uzbekistan plays on rail transit into Afghanistan. Interestingly, officials around Karimov seem to grasp that their president over-reacted to this event and appear anxious to keep relations on track. We need to seize the opportunity to engage with these officials in a more structured dialogue sooner rather than later if we are to advance a comprehensive agenda with this key regional player. Meanwhile, we intend to resume our dialogue with MFA on finalizing our transit agreement (ref B). End Summary.

2. (S) Following Foreign Minister Norov's icy March 13 demarche to the Ambassador on Tadjibaeva (ref A), the Ambassador requested a meeting with President Karimov to seek clarification of Norov's implicit threat to suspend transit of cargo for U.S. forces in Afghanistan via the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). Karimov received the Ambassador for an hour and a half on March 18, with Norov in attendance. As the meeting wore on, it became clear that Karimov -- alternately angry, cajoling, mocking and wise -- wanted to vent but did not intend to pull the plug on U.S.-Uzbek cooperation.

3. (S) Karimov began by asking the Ambassador to explain the "women of courage" event and what was meant by presenting the award to Tadjibaeva at such a high-profile occasion. The Ambassador described what the event was and what it was not: it was intended to recognize the accomplishments of individual women in advancing international human rights, to which Secretary Clinton and First Lady Obama were personally committed and which occupied a high place on the U.S. policy agenda. It was not the product of any overall U.S. policy review of Central Asia or Uzbekistan, as this review was still in progress, nor was it intended to single out Uzbekistan or suggest that we endorsed any opposition political group or agenda. In fact, the Ambassador said, Tadjibaeva was someone who advocated engagement with the authorities rather than sanctions or isolation as a way to advance human rights, a view which had earned her criticism from some human rights groups at home and abroad.

4. (S) Karimov called this description "superficial" and said the event seemed to represent "old thinking." He criticized the previous Administration's foreign policy and said he had been waiting to see where the new Administration was headed. He recognized that the

economic crisis required immediate attention to domestic affairs, but he was confident that the U.S. economic system was resilient enough to right itself. Meanwhile, the March 11 event, with its high profile "PR" content, had damaged trust between the U.S. and Uzbekistan. He had sought in 2007 to re-start relations with the U.S. from a "clean slate," focused on "step-by-step" efforts to build trust based on mutual respect rather than pressure or "instruction" from abroad. But recognizing Tadjibaeva in such a prominent way was a mistake. Calling her a "swindler," he accused Tadjibaeva of cohabitating with an Interior Ministry official and betraying other activists. He seemed especially angry that Tadjibaeva might be seen as a political figure in her own right being cultivated to challenge him. Calming down, he finally took the tack that Tadjibaeva did not deserve much attention at all, which was why she had been released in the first place last year in a step designed to meet the U.S. halfway. "Put yourself in my place," he asked plaintively -- "would you trust me if I had done this?" The Ambassador reiterated that this event was an opportunity to inspire women around the world but it would be a mistake to view it as the sum total of U.S. policy on Uzbekistan; the U.S. remained interested in finding ways to build trust with Uzbekistan and make effective progress on the full range of issues.

5. (S) Saying he would take the Ambassador's comments under advisement, Karimov turned to a lambasting of Russian policy in the region. He accused President Medvedev of aggressively seeking to restore a Russian sphere of influence in the Near Abroad and pointed to an event at the Russian Ministry of Defense yesterday at which Medvedev and the Russian defense minister reportedly declared an intention to confront NATO in the region. He accused Russia of seeking to stoke conflicts that its CSTO rapid reaction force could then move in to resolve (including in Georgia, where he did not rule out a clash this spring), and he said forcefully that Uzbekistan would have no part in such efforts to "militarize" the region. He also accused the Russians of seeking to control Central Asia's water supplies. The relevance of his tirade became clear when he urged the U.S. not to alienate Uzbekistan given its key role in standing up to Russian ambitions. However, he went on to plead for closer cooperation with the U.S. on human rights and democratization -- "we need your help, I want Uzbekistan to be a flourishing, democratic country." Such help just should not come in the form of "diktats" or pressure, which was "counterproductive," he said.

6. (S) Addressing Afghan transit, Karimov pointed to NDN test shipments that had just reached Afghanistan and criticized the Russians for acting as if the "door" to Afghanistan was their door. He pointed to Russian FM Lavrov's visit to Kabul as an example of efforts, in advance of the SCO conference on Afghanistan in Moscow later this month, to make the U.S. and NATO believe that "all the keys to Afghanistan lie in Moscow." He claimed that Russia had

decided Karzai should stay in office (curiously, Karimov said he was giving us this information "for free, but it cost a lot" -- implying perhaps it came from intelligence sources). He made a half-hearted pitch for his "6 plus 3" negotiating format on Afghanistan, and praised us for plans to bring Iran into discussions on next steps in Afghanistan. Finally, he confirmed a couple of times that the understandings he had reached with General Petraeus in January remained in effect, but he urged us to remember the key role Uzbekistan plays -- "don't thank Russia" (he claimed that former President Bush had thanked then-President Putin for the fact that Uzbekistan had put the K-2 air base at U.S. disposal in 2002).

7. (S) Ambassador's Comment: Clearly Karimov was concerned that the U.S. had made a policy decision to abandon cooperation with him. Equally clearly, pressuring him (especially publicly) could cost us transit through Uzbekistan into Afghanistan, not to mention the ability to engage on human rights and other issues. What is most interesting is that senior staff around him appear to be letting on to us (for the first time) that they know his behavior can harm Uzbek interests and even contradict those positions which he himself espouses. We should seize this opportunity to engage with these officials in a more structured dialogue. The approach of working around Karimov at the margins (see ref C - 07 TASHKENT 2026 NOTAL) may be galling in the face of his intransigence, but ultimately it is likely to get us further on issues across-the-board pending the political succession that inevitably will occur here one of these days. Meanwhile, we intend to convey ref B response to the latest Uzbek proposal on the exchange of letters regarding Afghan transit (NDN) shortly.

NORLAND